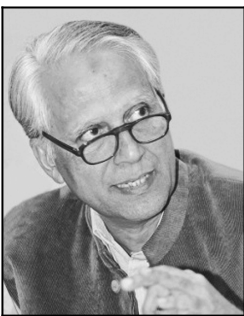


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Domestic issues need to be addressed in Iran



By : Muhammad Zamir



Analyst Ali Fathollah Nejad has suggested that the instability and protests that recently struck several cities and townships in Iran in the last week of December and then continued for a few days into the first week of January, 2018 were due to structural reasons. It was “kicked off by the economically dispossessed youth and joined by lower sections of the middle class, students and also some pensioners. It reached an unprecedented geographical scope with protests spanning across 70 mainly smaller cities and towns with more than 42,000 people, 90 percent of whom were under the age of 25”. Fingers have also been pointed towards the evolving socio-economic disparity and the urban-rural divide that is creating anger and

frustration amongst the younger generation.

The powerful Revolutionary Guards have however blamed the United States, United Kingdom and Israel for these disturbances.

The thrust of the political slogans at the protests in the beginning were not directed at Rouhani. Initially aimed against high prices, the anti-government protests quickly turned against the regime as a whole and in an unprecedented level against the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei himself. December 30 was the national day of "Alliance with the Supreme Leader". Instead, the day turned into one of burning the flag of the Islamic Republic and tearing photos of Ayatollah Khamenei. Much anger was expressed against the clerical establishment, its restrictive measures at home and its political and financial focus on Syria,

Iraq and Palestine, rather than on the needs of the Iranians.

It may be mentioned that Mashhad is the stronghold of Rouhani's hardline rival, Ebrahim Raisi, who was the preferred candidate of the Revolutionary Guards (IRGC). He is the chief custodian of the powerful religious foundation Astan Ghods Razavi and as such holds the largest pot of public funds. Together with his ultra-hardline father-in-law, Ayatollah Ahmad Alamalhoda, he is accused of having turned Mashhad into a key location for opposing Rouhani and his policies. Mashhad was also at the centre of the high-profile fraud case of Padideh Shandiz Construction. The \$35bn fraud case revealed unprecedented corruption at the highest levels dating back to the hardline government of Ahmadinejad.. The chief executive of the firm was jailed in 2016. Investor shares dropped drastically in value and there was no state-owned enterprise control. Since then investors have regularly protested in Mashhad and Tehran.

Unconfirmed reports have indicated that the protests left about 20 dead and resulted in the arrest of several hundred protest participants.

Subsequently Islamic Revolution Devotees Society (Jamiyat-e Isargara-e Enqelb-e Eslami), a conservative party of which Ahmadinejad was a founding Member, has claimed that since March 2016, Iran has supposedly witnessed more than 400 protests. There have been protests by semi-skilled workers over unpaid salaries, neoliberal economic policies and resistance towards organizing of labour through alleged arbitrary layoffs. This appears to have led to the arrest of the former President Ahmadinejad (who was President between 2005 and 2013).

Such protests, it may be recalled, had also taken place earlier during the time of the Ahmadinejad Presidency. However, this time round, the anger appears to have stemmed not only from the question of authorities not doing enough with regard to rights and a decent minimum wage but also over the issue of ignoring concerns of pensioners and teachers angry with unpaid pensions and low salaries.

Critics of Iran did not lose time to also draw attention to the fact that in May, 2017 there had also been expression of rage after the deadly mine explosion in northern Iran. Angry miners had gone to the extent of attacking President Rouhani's armoured vehicle when he wanted to visit the site. This anger and subsequent criticism found sympathetic ears about poor condition that existed within the public housing sector after heavy earthquakes shook the country in mid-November. Abrupt collapse of buildings leading to numerous people being buried under their rubble raised the question of corruption within this sector. The Rouhani Administration's hesitant reaction to provide aid to the victims in the prevailing cold weather also added insult to injury.

Some analysts have also suggested that the multilayered frustrations against the Rouhani Administration was taken forward because of the government's announcement that efforts would be underway in tackling the issue of social justice through the use of large funds that would be made available to religious foundations, run by both the regime's conservative and reformist camps, as well as the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). This led to fierce criticism of the proposed budget on social networks and within the social media matrix. This was picked up all over the world and special attention was given in spreading this dissatisfaction by expatriate Iranians who have sought sanctuary in different European and North American countries.

These developments over the past weeks and months, according to sociologists and security analysts helped to increase social frustration - an important factor in any uprising. Such dissatisfaction has also increased because the Iranians in general have all noted that economic development has returned after years of isolation. The GDP is growing again at around five per cent but socio-economic development is not growing at the same pace. Economists have in this context noted that despite economic success, economic dividends are not being distributed equally. They are also pointing out that such dimensions might be emerging because of lack of transparency in decision-making which in turn is affecting accountability. This, they mention, is raising income inequality in smaller cities. This is also creating frustration among the youth population.

Consequently, some are drawing parallels between the evolving situations in Iran and the wave of protests that happened eight years ago. In this context they are referring to these recent protests as the

beginning of Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt and the Green Movement protests over Iran's disputed 2009 election in Iran. The fact that these demonstrations received support of the USA and Israel exasperated Iran. This frustration increased further when some prominent Iranian figures such as the former Crown Prince, Reza Pahlavi and the Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi asked the US to increase pressure on Iran.

On the other side of the coin, certain analysts have observed that President Hassan Rouhani will be able to overcome the emerging challenges. They are referring to the four courageous steps that he has taken over the past two years - all of which have infuriated the hardliners: Against formidable odds he has managed to complete the Iran nuclear deal; has stood up directly to the hardliners siding instead with the reformists; taken the recommendations of the International Monetary Fund and implemented fiscal restraints policy and also taken some measures to tackle high-level corruption.

Russia and the United States, one for and the other against Iran, have clashed on 5 January in the United Nations Security Council at an emergency session convened to discuss recent events in Iran. Nikki Haley, US Permanent Representative to the United Nations, called the protests "something the world must take note of" and a "powerful exhibition of brave people" risking their lives to exercise their right to speak. However, Russia's UN Envoy, Vassily Nebenzia, slammed the United States for using the meeting to bring up the Iranian protests under a "bogus pretext." "Let Iran deal with its own problems," said Nebenzia, who again raised the idea of a Security Council meeting about protests in Ferguson, Missouri, and Occupy Wall Street demonstrations, as the Russian Mission to the United Nations had done in a Tweet earlier.

Gholamali Khoshroo, Iran's Permanent Representative to the United Nations was also critical and noted that the United States had abused its power by calling for the meeting. He observed that the Iranian protests fell outside the scope of the Security Council mandate. "There is a long history of US bullying at the UN, but this is a preposterous example -- the purely internal affairs of a nation," Khoshroo told the Council.

One aspect appears however to be relatively clear. A section of the Iranian population is frustrated by the inability of the Establishment to create any meaningful change whether at the economic or political level. This has been the third time Ayatollah Khamenei; the Supreme Leader has heard the call for his downfall since 2009. The hardline Kayhan newspaper has also acknowledged that: "the nation has risen in protest."

Consequently, it was good that the Iranian President eventually promised to create more jobs and improve the credit oversight. The question however remains as to whether Rouhani can now use the protests to his benefit and convince the Supreme Leader of the need to implement the "major economic corrective surgery" to which he referred to in his speech in the first week of this January.. This may be quite difficult while US sanctions hover over Iran's economy.

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